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Review of *Contested Terrain*

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Books Reviewed

Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century.
By Richard Edwards. (New York: Basic Books, 1979. Pp. ix, 261)

Richard Edwards's *Contested Terrain* is about conflict between capital and labor in the American workplace and the systems of control designed by employers to contain it. Because the workplace is hierarchical and authoritarian, because the interests of workers and those of employers inevitably collide (the worker resisting the treatment of his labor power as a commodity, and the capitalist seeking to extract the maximum amount of work from the purchased labor power without increased wage cost), and because of fundamental class antagonism, Edwards believes both the historical pattern of organizing work and the array of contemporary methods for its organization are to be understood primarily in terms of the different systems of physical control developed in the workplace to limit resistance to the direction of the employer. Three basic forms of organization are distinguished: first, simple control, associated with both 19th-century, single-entrepreneur firms, and today's small business sector, where the worker suffers an unsystematic mix of sanctions and incentives, dealt out somewhat arbitrarily by a few favored foremen and the owner himself; second, technical control, associated with design of production operations and the technical apparatus of assembly line manufacturing, such that the worker is increasingly isolated from other workers and fitted to a place in the machinery; and third, bureaucratic control, associated with replacement of "rule by supervisor command" by the rule of the hierarchical, stratified institution, so that the worker is constrained by the dictates of ascending (and descending) the "career" ladder.

What is good about this book is the detail with which Edwards shows how in the presence of class antagonisms various technical relations of production generate particular forms of labor organization, and how employers have continuously evolved successful, new forms of labor control in response to workers' efforts to protect the quality of their labor. Edwards, however, is interested in explaining more than just the general pattern of labor control and workplace organization in the United States. He also wants to account for both the sources of changes in systems of control and those factors that guaranteed the suc-

cess of new systems of control. These indeed he identifies in the unfailing ability of employers and management to respond to workers' resistance with techniques and methods sufficient to maintain capital's control through over 150 years of development of American industry. Edwards asserts that "each transformation occurred as a resolution of intensifying conflict and contradiction in the firm's operations" (p. 18). Resolution of conflict, that is, occurs in the workplace or specifically on the job, where contradiction between labor and management is primarily manifested and where the employer responds by instructing the worker in all his motions and activities. No mention of the direction of labor *beyond* factory walls is essential to this account of workplace organization, nor apparently is such outside control crucial to the success of manipulation of labor within those walls.

Thus, underlying Edwards's view is the thesis that productive relations in American society are independent of other social relations in this society in both their development and character. Yet neither is this thesis nor the particular view of workplace organization it supports likely to be correct. It is obvious that other factors have contributed and will continue to contribute to control of labor both within and without factory walls, and that any account of workplace organization that focuses exclusively on physical control inside the workplace must at least offer some argument that these other factors are insignificant. In particular it would be important to consider the impact of external migration from Europe and internal migration from the American South in maintaining a constant surplus of labor in industrial areas, thus making it possible for firms to remove workers from the workplace who threaten the existing systems of control. For his view to be correct, Edwards would have to demonstrate that the threat of expulsion from employment was without effect on recalcitrant workers. Relatedly, it would also be important to consider the impact of various measures used by the state in the interests of the business sector, such as years of antiunion legislation as well as regular use of police power to guarantee compliance with the law of the land. That these measures can be abstracted from the efforts at labor direction within the factory in any successful system of workplace management is doubtful indeed. Finally, other matters, such as the views promoted in the press and the educational system that labor organization was tantamount to anti-Americanism and would undermine the values of American life, also cannot be ignored.

Occasional remarks in *Contested Terrain* indicate an awareness of these sorts of matters on Edwards's part. However, nowhere is there any systematic treatment of those questions, which are inescapable for the main view of the book. *Contested Terrain* suffers accordingly.

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